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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5689
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 006308

E.O. 12356: DECL:OADR
TAGS: PGOV PREL ETRD BEXP US SY
SUBJECT: ASAD INSIDER SEES BASHAR COMING TO HELP,
WANTS TO SELL U.S. AIRPLANES

¶11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT

¶12. SUMMARY: MUHAMMAD MAKHLUF TOLD US HIS NEPHEW BASHAR AL-ASAD IS RETURNING TO DAMASCUS SOON (AFTER MILITARY TRAINING IN HIMS) TO TAKE UP FULL TIME HIS LATE BROTHER BASIL'S FORMER PORTFOLIO IN DOMESTIC AFFAIRS. HE DOES NOT, HOWEVER, SEE MUCH OF A ROLE FOR BASHAR IN LEBANON. MAKHLUF SAID THAT, AFTER PEACE, SYRIA WOULD WITHDRAW FROM LEBANON, OR REMAIN ONLY AT LEBANESE INSISTENCE. ACCORDING TO MAKHLUF, SYRIA WILL CONTINUE TO REJECT SECRET TALKS WITH THE ISRAELIS, AND WILL INSIST ON A CONTINUED U.S. ROLE, WHICH IT SEES AS ESSENTIAL THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS. HE ADDED THAT THE U.S. WAS NAIVE TO PROMOTE DIRECT ISRAELI/ARAB CONTACTS BECAUSE THEY WOULD PROMOTE ONLY ISRAELI, NOT U.S. INTERESTS. ON AFFAIRS CLOSER TO HIS POCKETBOOK, MAKHLUF SAID THAT HE WOULD BE THE ONLY EFFECTIVE AGENT FOR BOEING. MAKHLUF'S WORDS REFLECT BOTH THE TYPE OF VIEWS THAT ASAD HEARS AND HIS CURRENT POLICY LINE. END SUMMARY

¶13. IN A DECEMBER 15 CONVERSATION WITH THE DCM AND ECONOFF, PRESIDENT ASAD'S BROTHER-IN-LAW, MUHAMMAD MAKHLUF, SAID THAT THE PRESIDENT'S OLDEST LIVING SON, BASHAR WOULD SOON TAKE UP FULLY HIS DECEASED OLDER BROTHER BASIL'S FORMER ROLE AS THE PRESIDENT'S EYES AND EARS IN SYRIAN SOCIETY. BASHAR RECENTLY GRADUATED FROM AN ARMOR SCHOOL IN HIMS AND WILL RETURN TO DAMASCUS ON DECEMBER 20. ACCORDING TO MAKHLUF, BASHAR WILL BE PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR ENSURING THE PROPER OPERATION OF SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, MANY OF WHICH, SAID MAKHLUF, ARE RIVEN WITH INCOMPETENCE AND CORRUPTION. PRESIDENT ASAD, MAKHLUF NOTED, HAD HAD TO CARRY TOO LARGE A BURDEN SINCE BASIL'S DEATH, AND BASHAR SHOULD NOW BE IN A POSITION TO SHOULDER SOME OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF RULING.

¶14. IN RESPONSE TO THE DCM'S QUESTION, MAKHLUF INDICATED THAT, UNLIKE BASIL, BASHAR WOULD NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN LEBANON (SEE REPORTING IN OTHER CHANNELS POINTING TO HIS AND LEBANESE LEADERS' EFFORTS TO BUILD TIES TO ONE ANOTHER), AND WOULD FOCUS ON THE SYRIAN INTERNAL SCENE. MAKHLUF SAID THAT THE PRESS OF FOREIGN POLICY, INCLUDING THE PEACE PROCESS AND INTENSIFIED RELATIONS WITH EGYPT, LEFT LITTLE TIME FOR ASAD TO DEAL WITH DOMESTIC ISSUES, THUS CREATING A VACUUM, WHICH BASHAR WOULD NOW BE EXPECTED TO FILL. MAKHLUF EMPHASIZED BASHAR'S FITNESS FOR HIS NEW ROLE, CLAIMING THAT A FEW MONTHS OF TRAINING HAD MADE HIM A "REAL MILITARY MAN." (COMMENT: SINCE MOST POLITICAL FIGURES OF ANY CONSEQUENCE IN SYRIA HAVE MILITARY BACKGROUNDS, BASHAR'S HAVING THEORETICALLY BECOME A SOLDIER LENDS HIM AT LEAST A FAÇADE OF CREDIBILITY. END COMMENT)

SYRIA WANTS OUT OF LEBANON, UNLESS...

¶15. ON THE SUBJECT OF SYRIA'S PRESENCE IN LEBANON, MAKHLUF COMPLAINED ABOUT THE COSTS, BOTH FINANCIAL AND IN LOSS OF READINESS, FOR THE SYRIAN MILITARY. HE SAID THAT, WITH PEACE, SYRIA WOULD WITHDRAW FROM

LEBANON. MAKHLUF FOLLOWED THIS SEEMINGLY EMPHATIC STATEMENT WITH THE QUALIFIER THAT THIS POLICY WAS FIRM, UNLESS, OF COURSE, THE GOL "INSISTED" THAT SOME SYRIAN FORCES REMAIN. HE ADDED THAT, WITH PEACE, HIZBALLAH WOULD BE "ELIMINATED" (AS A MILITARY ENTITY) BY THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES, WITH SYRIAN SUPPORT.

¶6. AS EVIDENCE OF THE BENEFITS TO LEBANON OF SYRIA'S PRESENCE IN LEBANON, MAKHLUF CITED ACTIVITY AGAINST THE "POISON" OF NARCOTICS, SAYING THAT SYRIA HAD SUCCEEDED IN ELIMINATING NARCOTICS CULTIVATION IN ITS NEIGHBOR'S LAND, WHERE THE U.S. HAD FAILED IN SIMILAR ATTEMPTS.

¶7. IN REPOSE TO THE DCM'S STATEMENT THAT WE ACKNOWLEDGE SYRIA'S AND LEBANON'S EFFECTIVE ACTIONS AGAINST CULTIVATORS, BUT WANT MORE DONE AGAINST THE UBIQUITOUS PROCESSING LABS, MAKHLUF CLAIMED THAT SYRIA DID NOT WANT TO INTERFERE WITH LEBANON'S DAILY OPERATIONS BECAUSE SUCH ACTIVITIES INEVITABLY LED TO CRITICISM OF SYRIA FOR DEROGATING LEBANESE SOVEREIGNTY, A FACTOR WHICH HE ALSO CLAIMED KEPT SYRIAN TROOPS FROM CONDUCTING LARGE, VISIBLE TRAINING OPERATIONS IN LEBANON. INSTEAD, SYRIA PREFERRED TO KEEP ITS TROOPS LARGELY IN THEIR GARRISONS AND RESPOND ONLY TO LEBANESE REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE. MAKHLUF LAMENTED SYRIA'S INABILITY TO PUBLICIZE ITS "GOOD DEEDS" IN LEBANON, SUCH AS RECONCILING ITS LEADERS OR COMBATTING DRUGS BECAUSE SUCH WORDS WOULD BE EXPLOITED TO CRITICIZE SYRIA'S BENEFICENT ROLE.

LATEST LINE ON THE PEACE PROCESS

¶8. MAKHLUF LARGEY STUCK TO THE CURRENT SYRIAN PUBLIC LINE ON THE PEACE PROCESS. THE PRESIDENT, INDEED, HAD MADE A STRATEGIC DECISION FOR PEACE, BUT HE WOULD INSIST THAT IT BE WITH DIGNITY AND HONOR. HE EMPHASIZED THAT SYRIA INSISTS ON A CONTINUED U.S. ROLE AND THAT SECRET, DIRECT TALKS WITH ISRAEL WERE UNACCEPTABLE. MAKHLUF REITERATED ASAD'S COMMITMENT TO THE PEACE PROCESS UNDER U.S. AUSPICES, BUT CONSTANTLY EXPRESSED SUSPICIONS ABOUT ISRAEL'S ULTIMATE INTENTIONS. CHARACTERISTICALLY, HE DERIDED THE ISRAELI AGREEMENTS WITH THE PLO AND JORDAN. MAKHLUF SAID THAT ASAD WOULD ONLY LOOK FOR A STRATEGY OTHER THAN U.S. MEDIATION IF HE FELT THAT SUCH MEDIATION ABSOLUTELY WOULD NOT WORK. (COMMENT: THIS LAST EXPRESSION WAS AMBIGUOUS, BUT IT SEEMS MORE LIKELY TO BE AN IMPLICIT THREAT OF RENEWED PROXY VIOLENCE, THAN CONSIDERATION OF DIRECT TALKS. END COMMENT)

¶9. MAKHLUF SAID THAT A FRIEND OF HIS VISITING THE U.S. HAD BEEN APPROACHED BY A "SENIOR AMERICAN JEW" WHO SAID THAT SYRIA COULD DO FAR BETTER DEALING DIRECTLY WITH ISRAEL THAN THROUGH THE U.S., AND OFFERED TO BROKER SUCH CONTACTS. MAKHLUF SAID HE HAD SENT HIS FRIEND TO TELL HIS STORY TO THE FONMIN, BUT THAT THERE HAD BEEN NO CHANGE IN ASAD'S POLICY ON THE BASIS OF THIS OR ANY OTHER ISRAELI APPROACH. MAKHLUF SAID THAT SYRIA WANTS A REAL PEACE, NOT A FAKE OR A FANTASY PEACE, AS EXISTS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SOME OF THE OTHER ARABS.

¶10. MAKHLUF ADDED THAT HIS READING OF HISTORY CONVINCED HIM THAT THE ISRAELIS/JEWS ONLY PROTECTED THEIR OWN INTERESTS AND THAT THE U.S. WAS DISPLAYING "NAIVETE" IN PROMOTING ISRAELI/GULF CONTACTS. (COMMENT: THIS REMARK ALLUDES TO AN EARLIER CONVERSATION MAKHLUF HAD WITH US IN WHICH HE WARNED THAT ISRAEL SOUGHT TO DOMINATE TRADE IN THE REGION'S OIL TO THE DETRIMENT OF U.S. STRATEGIC AND COMMERCIAL INTERESTS.) MAKHLUF EXPRESSED MYSTIFICATION AS TO WHY THE ISRAELIS WOULD WANT DIRECT NEGOTIATIONS WITH SYRIA, SINCE WITHOUT U.S.

SUPPORT, THERE WOULD BE NO ISRAEL.

MAKHLUF WANTS "TO HELP" BOEING

¶11. AFTER A GENERAL DISCUSSION OF THE DESIRABILITY OF INCREASED U.S. PARTICIPATION IN THE SYRIAN ECONOMY, MAKHLUF QUICKLY TURNED THE DISCUSSION TO BOEING'S INTEREST IN SELLING CIVILIAN AIRCRAFT TO SYRIAN ARAB AIRLINES (SAA). AFTER STATING THAT BOEING'S CURRENT LOCAL AGENT WAS HIS "FRIEND," MAKHLUF WENT ON TO SAY THAT HE WAS NOT COMPETENT TO MAKE THIS DEAL. AIRBUS, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAD MADE SIGNIFICANT CONCESSIONS IN ITS PROPOSED DEAL WITH SAA AND WAS NEARLY READY TO SIGN. IN ANSWER TO ECONOFF'S QUESTION ABOUT THE UTILITY OF ANY AGENT SINCE THE PRESIDENT WOULD DECIDE PERSONALLY ABOUT THIS PURCHASE, MAKHLUF SAID THAT EVEN THE PRESIDENT COULD NOT DECIDE ON BOEING IF AIRBUS OFFERED A MUCH BETTER DEAL, AND THE RIGHT AGENT COULD ENSURE THAT SUCH WAS NOT THE CASE. NOT SURPRISINGLY, MAKHLUF THEN SAID THAT HE AND HIS SON WANTED VERY MUCH TO MEET WITH BOEING. ECONOFF SAID HE WOULD CONVEY THIS INFORMATION TO BOEING.

¶12. COMMENT: MAKHLUF, WHO IS NOT WITHOUT A CERTAIN ROGUISH CHARM, NEVERTHELESS WEARS HIS BIGOTRY AND AVARICE ON HIS WELL-TAILORED SLEEVE. WE CONVEY HIS VIEWS AS AN INDICATION OF WHAT ASAD IS LIKELY TELLING TO AND HEARING FROM THOSE AROUND HIM. HIS COMMENTS ON THE NEED FOR BASHAR TO BECOME MORE ACTIVE ON THE DOMESTIC SCENE ARE CONSISTENT WITH ALL OTHER REPORTING AVAILABLE TO US. HOWEVER, DESPITE MAKHLUF'S COMMENTS TO THE CONTRARY PRESIDENT ASAD SEEMS TO BE USING BASHAR AND GID OPERATIVE NASSIF AS COUNTERWEIGHTS TO KHADDAM AND SHIHABI IN LEBANON. AS FOR THE PEACE PROCESS, MAKHLUF'S BLUNT COMMENTS ACCURATELY REFLECT THE SUSPICIONS WITH WHICH ASAD AND HIS INNER CIRCLE VIEW ISRAELI INTENTIONS, AND THEIR CONCERNs ABOUT THE WEAKNESS OF THEIR OWN MILITARY/DIPLOMATIC POSITION VIS A VIS ISRAEL. FOR THEM, THE U.S. ROLE IS ESSENTIAL AND THE DEALS CONCLUDED BETWEEN ISRAEL ON THE ONE HAND AND JORDAN AND THE PLO ON THE OTHER HAVE ONLY REINFORCED THIS CONVICTION.

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